



Behavioural Difficulties

Information for anyone who lives and/or works with children and young people

Behavioural difficulties - the signs

All children have moments when they do not behave properly. They can go through different phases as they develop and become more independent. Toddlers and adolescents can have their challenging moments and this might mean they push limits from time to time. With the help of parents, carers and teachers, most of them will learn to behave appropriately. Occasionally, a child will have a temper tantrum, or an outburst of aggression or destructive behaviour, but this is often nothing to worry about.

Behavioural difficulties can happen in children of all ages. Some children have serious behavioural difficulties. The signs to look out for:

- If the child continues to behave badly for several months or longer, is repeatedly being disobedient, cheeky and aggressive.
- If the child's behaviour is out of the ordinary, and seriously breaks the rules accepted in their home and school; this is much more than ordinary childish mischief or adolescent rebelliousness.

What is Conduct Disorder?

Sometimes, a child's behaviour can affect their development and interfere with their ability to lead a normal life. When behaviour is this much of a problem, it is called a Conduct Disorder. Younger children who behave disruptively and aggressively at home may be diagnosed as having Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). If behavioural difficulties are severe and persistent or a Conduct Disorder is suspected, ask your GP for advice.

Home based Help

As a parent, it can be easy to ignore your child when they are being good and only pay attention to them when they are behaving badly. Over time, the child learns that they only get attention when they are breaking the rules. Most children, including teenagers, need a lot of attention from their parents and may be unsure how to get this. Perhaps surprisingly, they seem to prefer angry or critical attention to being ignored. It is easy to see how, over time, a vicious circle can be set up.

With children, it can help if discipline is fair and consistent and for parents/carers to agree on how to handle their child's behaviour and offer positive praise and love. This can be difficult to manage alone without the support of others, and many parents/carers require extra help. Parenting groups can advise you on how to access the support you need, and share experiences with others who are facing similar problems with their own children. These groups can offer training in helping you encourage positive behaviour in your child.

School based Help

Many young people with behavioural difficulties struggle at school and this can be a source of distress. School staff can help to focus on positive behaviours and reinforce work taking place at home and in the community.

Young people with behavioural difficulties often need help with social skills, and school may be able to offer this. Some children need individual classroom support and an assessment of learning difficulties. When the problems are severe, some children may have to be moved to special education placements or schools where their behavioural problems can be managed.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists. (2013). Mental Health and Growing Up: Factsheets for Parents, Teachers and Young People (4th ed.). Cambridge: Royal College of Psychiatrists.

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